



## **Answers to Questions for the Record Following a Hearing on CBO's Appropriation Request for Fiscal Year 2021 Conducted by the Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch, House Committee on Appropriations**

*On February 12, 2020, the House Committee on Appropriations convened a hearing at which Phillip L. Swagel, the Congressional Budget Office's Director, testified about the agency's appropriation request.<sup>1</sup> After the hearing, Chairman Ryan and Ranking Member Herrera Beutler submitted questions for the record. This document provides CBO's answers. It is available at [www.cbo.gov/publication/56197](http://www.cbo.gov/publication/56197).*

### **Chairman Ryan**

**Question.** The Committee recognizes the importance of CBO in ensuring we can accurately assess the current and future budgetary and economic trends in the U.S. Minimizing barriers to CBO's work is a top priority. What barriers does CBO face and what recommendations do you have on removing them?

**Answer.** To do its work, CBO needs to hire and retain staff, provide them with appropriate tools and training, and obtain data for them to analyze. The Congress has supported CBO's efforts to provide staff with tools and training, and data have generally been accessible. CBO has been able to attract top talent with its mission and culture, but it has to compete with other federal and private-sector entities, which often have been able to offer higher salaries. One way to boost recruitment and retention would be to offer more competitive benefits. In particular, it would be helpful if CBO's staff could have higher priority in accessing the House of Representatives Child Care Center (HRCCC).

**Question.** CBO must enter into MOUs with federal agencies to access certain data sets. Would your work, in both its efficiency and its accuracy, be improved if CBO could enter into a standard agreement with all agencies, rather than individual MOUs?

**Answer.** The accuracy of CBO's estimates depends in part on receiving information from agencies in a timely manner. Most of CBO's interactions with executive branch agencies have been cooperative and productive. CBO has sometimes faced delays in obtaining information from agencies while negotiating memorandums of understanding.

Having a standard agreement might help CBO obtain information more quickly. The Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974 already provides the essential

---

1. See testimony of Phillip L. Swagel, Director, Congressional Budget Office, before the House Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch, *CBO's Appropriation Request for Fiscal Year 2021* (February 12, 2020), [www.cbo.gov/publication/56100](http://www.cbo.gov/publication/56100).

terms of CBO's agreements. CBO must provide the same level of confidentiality as the agency providing the data. In addition, if there was an unauthorized disclosure, CBO's employees would face the same penalties as employees of the agency providing the data. A challenge to having a standard agreement is that the protocols that agencies follow to protect data from unauthorized disclosure change with technology and the threat environment.

**Question.** Are there times when an agency discontinues a report or data set upon which CBO relies? What are the consequences when this happens?

**Answer.** Most often, when information that CBO needs is not available (for example, information about people with temporary visas who leave the country), the data do not exist or were never collected. At times, however, CBO has stopped getting information because an agency updated its systems (causing delays in regular publication) or streamlined its reports (removing previously published information). For example, the Department of Health and Human Services has produced reports that provide immigration statistics, but some of those reports have not been continued or have contained only a subset of information from the previous year. In such cases, CBO must use less recent data to produce estimates until new data become available, making those estimates less certain.

Most agencies have tried to provide CBO with information when it was needed. CBO expects that in response to the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018, agencies will share more administrative data that will prove useful for policy analysis.

**Question.** Does CBO have any programs that promote wellness, and if not are there any plans for them in the future?

**Answer.** CBO employees have access to the House Wellness Center, the Office of Employee Assistance, and the House Staff Fitness Center. The agency highlights those partnerships in orientations for new employees, provides information through benefits counseling, posts printed materials, and features the House Wellness Center website on its intranet (under "Most Popular Links"). The Human Resources Office shares House Wellness Center notices agencywide and encourages CBO staff to sign up directly for email alerts to stay up-to-date on the center's offerings.

**Question.** What actions are being taken to keep CBO competitive with the private sector? Other than bonuses, how do you compete?

**Answer.** CBO cannot compete with the private sector when it comes to compensation—including bonuses as well as salaries—but it attracts economists and analysts because of its mission, its workplace culture, and its impact on Congressional decisionmaking. Every other year, the agency participates in the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings. Over the past 10 years, it has been ranked in the top 10 among small agencies each time it has participated; most recently, in 2018, CBO was ranked third.

CBO also uses a small student loan repayment program as an incentive in recruiting. Because of limited funding, the agency reserves the program for staff in positions that are difficult to fill, such as those in health and financial economics. The agency has also adjusted its leave policies to increase its competitiveness.

**Question.** Besides salary and bonuses, are there other options to entice potential employees? Sometimes childcare is used as an enticement; what are CBO's options for childcare, are CBO employees allowed to use the House or Senate Daycares?

**Answer.** Access to child care near the workplace is an attractive benefit for some parents. CBO employees may apply for their children to attend the House of Representatives Child Care Center or the Senate Child Care Center. However, under current law, priority for enrollment at the HRCCC is determined by a tiered system, with Members, House staff, and other staff of the House's Chief Administrative Officer prioritized first, followed by staff at CBO and other legislative branch agencies. A similar structure exists for the Senate Child Care Center. Generally, that means that CBO staff members do not have access to the centers until their children are no longer infants.

Some agencies with which CBO competes for staff are able to attract new hires by providing additional benefits on top of what the federal government offers. Depending on the agency, those may include a 401(k) plan in addition to the Thrift Savings Plan, short- and long-term disability plans, and additional subsidies toward health benefit premiums. Alternatively, another option for enticing potential employees might be to provide additional funding for student loan repayment.

**Question.** Can you give us an idea of your office space issues?

**Answer.** CBO has been pursuing a multiyear staffing plan to bolster the agency's capacity to make its work transparent and responsive. As a result, CBO has grown significantly, adding 27 full-time-equivalent positions since 2018. The agency is located on the fourth floor of the Ford House Office Building, where space is limited, but CBO has made room for the new employees by partitioning some offices more efficiently and eliminating some collaborative spaces. Consequently, the average office space per employee has fallen below the General Services Administration's standard of 190 square feet. Returning to that standard would require CBO's office space to expand by roughly 4,000 square feet.

**Question.** The budget request for the CBO this year is \$57.3 million, a small increase of \$2.4 million over the FY 2020 enacted level; how much of this increase can be attributed to the new FERS and other personnel contributions?

**Answer.** The increase in contributions to the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) totaled \$820,000, and the increase in other personnel contributions totaled \$180,000.

**Question.** Please detail how would CBO handle a flat budget? What would you have to do to come down?

**Answer.** To keep its budget flat, CBO would have to cut \$2.4 million from its budget request for fiscal year 2021. Making that change would be a challenge. CBO would cut nonpersonnel spending where possible—for example, spending on staff travel, training, and consulting services. Even so, the main source of savings would be cuts in spending on personnel. CBO could avoid furloughs by eliminating performance bonuses, severely cutting recruitment bonuses, freezing hiring, and allowing the agency's workforce to shrink through attrition. By the end of fiscal year 2021, CBO would probably have 6 to 10 fewer full-time-equivalent positions.

For the past several years, CBO has engaged in efforts to add staff who can help make the agency's work as transparent and responsive as possible. Under a hiring freeze, those

efforts would stall—or even be partially reversed, if any of those employees left the agency. Moreover, as employees retired or resigned, the remaining staff could have an uneven mix of skills. For example, there could be gaps in staff members' expertise in policy areas such as health care, for which analytical ability is in especially high demand.

### **Ranking Member Herrera Beutler**

**Question.** What is the current IT hosting posture for CBO?

**Answer.** CBO is currently operating primarily out of the Alternate Computing Facility and uses an Equinix facility located in Ashburn, Virginia, as its secondary data center. (Later this year, CBO plans to make the Equinix facility its primary data center.) In addition, an increasing number of CBO's information technology (IT) services are based in the public cloud.

**Question.** Do you have a mix of cloud-based and physical servers?

**Answer.** Yes, CBO uses what is known as a hybrid architecture of physical servers and cloud-based systems to support its IT operations.

**Question.** The House has recently decided to vacate the Alternate Computing Facility due to the systemic challenges it faces and decided that the risk to the House was too great to remain. What are CBO's plans?

**Answer.** For similar reasons, CBO plans to transition to the Equinix data center in Ashburn, Virginia, later this year. The Alternate Computing Facility will once again become the agency's backup data center.